HAWTHORNE AND THE ITALIAN

The Hawthornes were in Italy for seventeen months, arriving in January, 1858 and leaving finally in May, 1859. During that year and a half, Nathaniel Hawthorne was exposed to a wide range of Italian life, leaving him with impressions which were sometimes positive but which were more often negative. Certainly the winter of 1858-59 in Rome was for the Hawthornes a very unhappy time, and Una's recovery from the near-fatal « Roman fever » marked the virtual end of their Italian visit. However, from January to November of 1858, Nathaniel Hawthorne escorted his wife and children to magnificent Italian art galleries, palaces, and cathedrals. He appears to have been duly impressed with Italian art, but if one may judge from his comments and attitudes in *The Marble Faun*, of all things Italian, Hawtorne cared least for the Italian people themselves.

Hawthorne was quite naturally overwhelmed with the artistic grandeur of Italy, especially with the magnificent cathedrals. He visited many of them, and the *French and Italian Note-Books* are filled with his enthusiastic and detailed accounts of their splendors. In point of fact, the Catholic Church itself left a very favorable impression on Hawthorne. He was attracted by two features of Catholicism: the openness of its churches and the sacrament of confession [1]. Hawthorne often expressed his attraction to the Church in *The Marble Faun.*

1. HENRY G. FAIRBANKS, « Hawthorne and the Catholic Church », *Boston University Studies in English* I (1955), pp. 148-165. See also GILBERT P. VOIGHT, « Hawthorne and the Roman Catholic Church », *New England Quarterly* XIX (1946), pp. 394-398.

He says of Hilda's visit to St. Peter's in Chapter XXXVIII, « She went . . . to observe how closely the popish faith applied itsel to all human occasions » [2]. The benefits of Catholicism, however attractive to a New Englander, seemed to be lost on the disinterested and lackadaisical Italian spirit. The Italians took their Church for granted. « For all their frequent acts of worship, Hawthorne observed the Italian laity left much to be desired in their morals » [3]. « Then there was the venality of the people which, seemingly, could co-exist with their piety » [4]. Hawthorne himself sums up his feelings about the relation of the Italian people, clergy and laity, to their religion in the following passage from Chapter XLV of *The Marble Faun.*

> For here was a priesthood, pampered, sensual, with red and bloated cheeks, and carnal eyes. With apparently a grosser development of animal life than most men, they were placed in an unnatural relation with woman, and thereby lost the healthy, human conscience that pertains to other human beings, who own the sweet household ties connecting them with wife and daughter. And here was an indolent nobility, with no high aims or opportunities, but cultivating a vicious way of life, as if it were an art, and the only one which they cared to learn. Here was a population, high and low, that had no genuine belief in virtue; and if they recognized any act as criminal, they might throw off all care, remorse, and memory of it, by kneeling a little while at the confessional, and rising unburdened, active, elastic, and incited by fresh appetite for the next ensuing sin. (VI, 467,8)

Hawthorne thought the Italians a decadent people because they appeared neither to recognize nor respect either the grandeur of their native *objects d'art* or their genuine personal and spiritual relationship to their Church. In short, one feels

2. *The Marble Faun*, ed., GEORGE PARSONS LATHROP, The Riverside Edition, Vol. VI, p. 394. Hereafter references to a Hawthorne novel will be made to this edition and will include volume and page numbers included in the text within parentheses.

3. VOIGHT, p. 397.

4. FAIRBANK, p. 156.

that Hawthorne would have enjoyed his trip to Italy more, indeed might have found it perfect, had it not been for the Italian people.

Certainly Hawthorne's displeasure with the Italians finds ample expression in *The Marble Faun*: Italian food, people, ruins and numerous other aspects of Italian life are treated with his customary air of moral superiority. Too often in *The Marble Faun* the self righteous attitudes become overbearing, though in the cases of Italian art and the Catholic Church, Hawthorne's effects are softened by the ambiguity he apparently felt toward them. The portrait of Donatello is, to take a single example, an insulting one. One can never be quite sure if Donatello's simplicity is viewed with sympathy or not; and one is tempted to think that Hawthorne may have expressed his total displeasure with Italians by focusing on one character. Donatello is called a « faithful hound », a « bulldog », and a « pet spaniel ». His very connection to the animal world separates him from mankind because it strips him of his reason. With respect to this faun-like creature who represents, after all, Hawthorne's most ambitious attempt to characterize an Italian, one is forced to agree with Miriam's early appraisal, « No faun in Arcadia was ever a greater simpleton than Donatello ». (VI, 22)

Further examples of Hawthorne's displeasure with the Italians are dotted throughout the text: Rome is called the « native city of ruin », and Romans are called « crafty and selfish ». Hawthorne makes derogatory remarks about Italian hygiene, originality, and honor in typical authorial intrusions. In addition, he talks about the « evil smells » and « perverted Christianity » of Italy. Italian decadence is belabored throughout *The Marble Faun*.

In fairness one must point out Hawthorne's deliberate ambiguity [5], admitting that there are many conflicting references

5. Hawthorne's ambiguity is often discussed by critics, and a recent one has claimed that the numerous attempts to « divest him [Hawthorne] of ambiguity » is a misguided effort, « because it [ambiguity] shows the

to the Italian people and nation in *The Marble Faun*. For example, one sees often enough passages like the following which purport to prove Hawthorne's basic sympathy with Italy.

> ... Our heart-strings have mysteriously attached themselves to the Eternal City, and are drawing us thitherward again, as if it were more familiar, more intimately our home than even the spot where we were born. (VI, 373).

Here, as elsewhere, however, Hawthorne was customarily ambiguous. The above passage is only the tail-end of the first paragraph of Chapter XXXVI of *The Marble Faun*. The full paragraph reads like this:

> When we have once known Rome, and left her where she lies, like a long-decaying corpse, retaining a trace of the noble shape it was, but with accumulated dust and a fungous growth overspreading all its more admirable features, — left her in utter weariness, no doubt, of her narrow, crooked streets, so uncomfortably paved with little squares of lava that to tread over them is a penitential pilgrimage, so indescribably ugly, moreover, so cold, so alley-like, into which the sun never falls, and where a child wind forces its deadly breath into our lungs,—left her, tired of the sight of those immense seven-storied, yellow-washed hovels, or call them palaces, where all that is dreary in domestic life seems magnified and multiplied, and weary of climbing those staircases, which ascend from a ground floor of cook-shops, cobblers' stalls, stables, and regiments of cavalry, to a middle region of princes, cardinals, and ambassadors, and an upper tier of artists, just beneath the unattainable sky, — left her, worn out with shivering at the cheerless and smoky fireside by day and feasting with our own substance the ravenous little populace of a Roman bed at night, — left her, sick at heart of Italian trickery, which has uprooted whatever faith in man's integrity had endured till now, and sick at stomach of sour bread, sour wine, rancid butter, and bad cookery, needlessly bestowed on evil

nature of his insights and describes the world he perceived ». JAC THARPE, *Nathaniel Howthorne: Identity and Knowledge* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1967), pp. 9, 10. It may, then, be fair to say that Hawthorne never articulated his negative feelings toward the Italian because his feelings were simply not consistently negative.

meats, — left her, disgusted with the pretence of holiness and the reality of nastiness, each equally omnipresent, — left her, half lifeless from the languid atmosphere, the vital principle of which has been used up long ago, or corrupted by myriads of slaughters, — left her, crushed down in spirit with the desolation of her ruin, and the hopelessness of her future, — left her, in short hating her with all our might, and adding our individual curse to the infinite anathema which her old crimes have unmistakably brought down, — when we have left Rome in such mood as this, we are astonished by the discovery, by and by, that our heart-strings have mysteriously attached themselves to the Eternal City, and are drawing us thitherward again, as if it were more familiar, more intimately our home, than even the spot where we were born. (VI, 372,3)

While the passage does betray Hawthorne's mixed feeling toward Rome, one wonders if ever there was a more damning statement with fainter praise!

That Hawthorne came gradually to dislike Italians seems to be the result of his prolonged and often unhappy visit to Italy in 1858-59. But to suppose that this visit, filled as it was with sickness and languor, was the single cause of his distaste is to overlook the fact that Hawthorne brought to Italy a certain mild, though recognizable, negative predisposition toward Italians. The root of this feeling, which can properly be called a mild bias is unknown, though Hawthorne may have found unsettling the distressing poverty which doubtless accompanied the immigrant Italians in the 1840's and '50's. That the bias existed as far back as the winter of 1850-51, when Hawthorne was writing *The House of the Seven Gables*, becomes apparent after a brief examination of the Italian organ-grinder scenes in that romance.

In Chapter XI Clifford Pyncheon noticed rather lightheartedly something that was occurring below him. « One of those Italian boys (who are rather a modern feature of our streets) came along with his barell-organ, and stopped under the wide and cool shadows of the elm ». (III, 196) Notable here is that Clifford enjoyed the scene which starred the Italian, his mon-

key, and his company of players until the extended authorial intrusion, ending with the words,

> — take this monkey just as he was, in short, and you could desire no better image of the Mammon of copper coin, symbolizing the grossest form of the love of money. Neither was there any possibility of satisfying the covetous little devil. (III, 197)

After this intrusion, Clifford's attitude changes:

> He had taken childish delight in the music, and smiled, too, at the figures which it set in motion. But after looking a while at the long-tailed imp, he was so shocked by his horrible ugliness, spiritual as well as physical, that he actually began to shed tears; a weakness which men of merely delicate endowments, and destitute of the fiercer, deeper, and more tragic power of laughter, can hardly avoid, when the worst and meanest aspect of life happens to be presented to them. (III, 198)

There are four textual citations in the passage above which support the conclusion that Hawthorne held some poorly defined prejudice toward Italians as early as 1850, if not before.

First, and admittedly mild, is the reference to « Italian boys » which seems, clearly enough, to say that these boys were not American, not New Englanders. There is a sentiment here — perhaps an unconscious one — that these boys were not quite the *same* as American boys. Still, one can judge this sentiment with some sympathy when he realizes that Italian immigrants in New England in 1850 were not very numerous, and they must, by their appearance at least, have marked themselves from New England boys. In point of fact, fewer than 2,000 Italian immigrants of *all* ages lived in Boston in 1850 [6]. One can assume that there were very few in the smaller towns such as Salem. The likelihood that Hawthorne had had any great experiences with « Italian boys » at that time is slim,

6. Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculteration* (Cambridge, 1959), p. 52.

and one wonders what incident could have been of sufficient magnitude to have caused young Hawthorne's negative predisposition toward them [7].

Points number two, three, and four, however, are not so mild and, indeed, make number one more imposing. Point number two is Hawthorne's comment of the Italian's monkey, « the image of the Mammon of copper coin, symbolizing the grossest form of the love of money ». What makes this passage significant — apart from the self-righteous and indignant sentiment it reflects — is the zeal with which it is said. The alliterative value of the term assures its rapid utterance, and the condemning value of the word *grossest* is made particularly effactive because it modifies such an obvious secular evil as the « love of money ». That Hawthorne was referring to the Italian is likely since the monkey was simply an extension of its master. The condemnation of the Italian and his monkey touches point three which is that the scene has evoked tears in Clifford's eyes, tears which certain people « can hardly avoid when the worst and meanest aspect of life happens to be presented to them ». The young Italian boy, his monkey, and his troupe represent the « worst and meanest » to Hawthorne. The severity of the comment may have seemed appropriate to Hawthorne, but it causes the failure of the scene from a dramatic standpoint. Could such a passion have been aroused by the harmless scene described? Emotionally and dramatically the reader is unprepared for such strong sentiment, even in Clifford [8]. Hawthorne's splenetic outburst in this context seems

7. RANDALL STEWART, ed., *The American Notebooks by Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New Haven, 1932), p. 117. The original notebook entry for the organ-grinder scene is dated October 11, 1845, but curiously, the organ-grinder is not described there as an *Italian*. If a specific referent exists for Hawthorne's bias, it is likely to date back to an unrecorded incident between 1845 and 1850. For some reason the organ-grinder became an *Italian* organ-grinder during those years.

8. It is interesting to note that in the original notebook entry, Hawthorne's daughter, Una, is the one moved to tears by the organ-grinder and his monkey while in the novel it is the child-like Clifford.

not the natural dramatic conclusion of the scene but rather the manifestation, subconsciously perhaps, of his bias. Such a motivation is obviously external to the dramatic structure of the plot and constitutes a serious flaw.

One final point concerning Hawthorne's bias has to do with his abiding distaste for beggars. Recorded in *The Marble Faun* are many examples of Hawthorne's disgust with beggars, suggesting that his experiences in Italy may have helped form or at least confirm his opinions on the subject. Consider the following passages from *The Marble Faun*. The beggar's

> pertinacity need not seem so very singular to those who consider how slight a link serves to connect these vagabonds of idle Italy with any person that may have the ill-hap to bestow charity, or be otherwise serviceable to them, or betray the slightest interest in their fortunes. (VI, 51, 2)

The Spectre of the Catacomb « haunted her [Miriam] with more than the customary persistency of Italian mendicants, when once they have recognized a benefactor ». (VI, 47) The beggars at Monte Beni are also characterized:

> Paupers — for this kind of vermin infested the house of Monte Beni worse than any other spot in beggar-haunted Italy — stood beneath all the windows, making loud supplication, or even establishing themselves on the marble steps of the grand entrance. They ate and drank, and filled their bags, and pocketed the little money that was given them, and went forth on their devious ways, showering blessings innumerable on the mansion and its lord, and on the souls of his [Donatello's] deceased forefathers, who had always been just such simpletons as to be compassionate to beggary.

Kenyon and Donatello, after leaving Monte Beni for Rome, stopped at a church.

> After Kenyon and Donatello emerged from the church, however, they had better opportunity for acts of charity and mercy than for religious contemplation; being immediately surrounded by a swarm of beggars, who are the present possessors of Italy, and share the spoil of the stranger with the fleas and mosquitoes, their

formidable allies. These pests — the human ones — had hunted the two travellers at every stage of their journey . . . In one small village, Kenyon had the curiosity to count how many children were crying, whining, and bellowing all at once for alms. They proved to be more than forty of as ragged and dirty little imps as any in the world. (VI, 352)

Passing over for the moment the numerous comments above which testify to Hawthorne's displeasure with the Italians, one may note that in *The House of the Seven Gables* Hawthorne uses the term « foreign vagabond » to describe the young Italian organ-grinder and that it is echoed above in the term « vagabonds of idle Italy ». Moreover, one recalls that the Italian organ-grinder's monkey was called a « long-tailed imp », another term echoed above, though changed there to describe the « ragged and dirty » Italian beggars in *The Marble Faun*. The suggestion here is that Hawthorne may have considered Italians as « vagabonds » and « imps » long before he met the Italians in Italy who displeased him so. Finally, and most definitively, one recalls that the pertinacity of Italian beggars was used by Hawthorne in Chapter XIX of *The House of the Seven Gables*. The Italian organ-grinder was made to return to his position beneath the arched window.

Arriving under the shadow of the Pyncheon Elm, it proved to be the Italian boy, who, with his monkey and show of puppets, had once before played his hurdy-gurdy beneath the arched window. The pleasant face of Phoebe — and doubtless, too, the liberal recompense which she had flung him — still dwelt in his remenmbrance. (III, 346)

That Hawthorne had been impressed by the pertinacity of Italian beggars long before his trip to Italy is beyond question.

The conclusion, if an unhappy one, is that one can not explain Hewthorne's attitudes toward Italians by citing the unfortunate aspects of his visit to Italy in 1858 and 1859, for his negative predisposition toward the Italian had already

existed when he put together the materials of *The House of the Seven Gables* during the winter months of 1850 and 1851.

More directly, the evidence suggests that Hawthorne, for an unknown reason, probably held a mild bias toward Italians.

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